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9 April 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Comments on Selig S. Harrison's Article "Vietnam Had a Coalition Once"

1. Mr. Harrison's article in the Outlook section of the Sunday, 7 April edition of The Washington Post is a substantially accurate, though rather summary and superficial account of the complex 1945-1946 period during which Ho Chi Minh played the "national front" game with sophisticated, ruthless skill. Ho's immediate objectives, which he managed to achieve, were to build up the strength of his Communist Party and undercut all non-Communist nationalist groups so that when the Party opted to adopt a policy of armed struggle against the French, the Party would be strong enough to carry on the fight and none of its non-Communist nationalist rivals would be strong enough to challenge the Party's absolute primacy.

2. The origins of Ho's coalition or national front maneuvering considerably antedate the 22 December 1945 date given by Mr. Harrison; for that matter, they antedate the formal founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930.

3. Broadly speaking, modern Vietnamese nationalism -- which initially crystallized around opposition to French rule -- has gone through about four stages. The first stage, which covered roughly the first quarter of this century, was led by scholars and Mandarins who had personal and family roots in the imperial structure the French defeated and subverted into an instrument of French rule. In essence, these early nationalist leaders were seeking a restoration of the old order. The most famous of these first-generation nationalists was a distinguished classical scholar named Phan Boi Chau who, three decades too soon, had the vision of enlisting Japanese support in opposing French rule. Phan Boi Chau, though generally in exile, became a thorn in the French side and built up a loose but nonetheless occasionally effective organization of young nationalists who harassed the French in Indochina and plotted against them from abroad.

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4. Phan Boi Chau was well known to Ho, who was then using the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, was at that time (the early twenties) a Far Eastern organizer and agitprop specialist for the Comintern serving with the Borodin mission, and who was casting very covetous eyes on Chau's organization, particularly his circle of followers in Canton. In June 1925, Ho (or Quoc) arranged a meeting with Chau in Shanghai. Chau went trustingly to the rendezvous, not realizing that the house Ho had selected was just inside the boundary of the French concession. Chau was immediately arrested by the French police, sent back to Vietnam, tried, and given a death sentence subsequently commuted to life imprisonment. Ho is believed to have collected a 100,000 piastre reward for this little act, which he subsequently justified to some of his associates on the grounds that Chau was growing too old to be of further use to the revolution (i. e., he was too independent for Ho's liking), his arrest and trial would produce a useful surge of patriotic emotion in Vietnam (it did), and the money received from the French could be used by the cause (i. e., Communist Party) to win new recruits.

5. With Chau out of the way, Ho immediately set about taking over his organization, enlisting those who were willing to join the Communist cause and arranging for the neutralization or liquidation of those who were not. Members of Chau's organization willing to join the Communists were brought into the fold. Those who were not were betrayed to the French police. By acting thus (in what subsequent years proved to be quite typical fashion) Ho was able to gain new recruits, eliminate potential opponents and (from French rewards) generate revenue -- all at the same time.

6. The second stage of modern Vietnamese nationalism centers around the rise and fall of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party or Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD), a group consciously modeled, both doctrinally and organizationally on the Chinese KMT. (Quoc Dan Dang is simply Kuo Ming Tang rendered in Vietnamese.) Organized in 1927, the VNQDD was a fiercely nationalist, fiercely independent group determined to create a modern state free of foreign political, economic or ideological domination. In 1930, the VNQDD launched a premature attempt at a general uprising against the French, who put the rising down with a savage and efficient brutality that shattered the VNQDD for over a decade.

7. The demise of the VNQDD, which would have no truck with Ho's Moscow-oriented communism, left the way clear for the third stage of the anti-French struggle, which centers around the Vietnamese Communist Party's rise to primacy. The Party was technically founded in January 1930, though this "founding" actually involved the amalgamation under centralized direction of several Communist organizations and youth groups (including one made up

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of some of Phan Boi Chau's ex-followers) that Ho had established in the preceding five years. The thirties were years of building and organizational development, in which the Communist Party profitted from the shattered state of the VNQDD (which left it a relatively clear field) and also profitted, temporarily, from the 1936-1937 Popular Front political ~~gain~~ in metropolitan France that at least temporarily checked or restrained the zeal of the colonial security services.

8. The Party's golden opportunity came during the confused years of World War II and, particularly, in the chaotic period in Vietnam that followed Japan's precipitate surrender. During World War II, Indochina was an overseas dependency of the Vichy regime. It became, in effect, a Japanese protectorate in 1940, but internal affairs (until March 1945) were left in the hands of the French colonial government. Consequently, Indochina was not a healthy place for Communists or anti-French nationalists, many of whom decamped to southwestern China, then under Chinese Nationalist control. Following the Moscow line (as usual), Ho started playing the United Front theme soon after the German invasion of Russia. In May 1941, Ho organized a group built around and controlled by his Communist cadre but designed to appeal to non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists. This group was called the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi or League for Vietnamese Independence, better known under its short name of the Viet Minh. Ho's group went into temporary eclipse soon thereafter when Ho -- or Nguyen Ai Quoc as he was then called -- was thrown into a Chinese jail for his subversive (i. e., Communist) activities.

9. Several Chinese generals, most notably Chang Fa-k'uei (the then governor of Kwangsi province), wanted to make use of the Vietnamese exile community to establish intelligence and covert action nets in Japanese-occupied Vietnam. To further this objective, Chang stimulated a political congress of Vietnamese exiles in 1942 which led to the creation of a "League of Vietnamese Revolutionary Parties" -- Viet Nam Cach Menh Dong Minh Hoi -- known generally as the Dong Minh Hoi. This is the "Nationalist Front" referred to in Mr. Harrison's somewhat over-simplified account of what happened in 1945 and 1946.

10. The Vietnamese in the Dong Minh Hoi proved more adept at argumentation than organization. Frustrated at their lack of success, Chang Fa-k'uei took Nguyen Ai Quoc out of jail and made a deal. To escape the attention of the Nationalist police, Quoc, the well-known ruthless Comintern agent on whom the police had a fat file, became Ho Chi Minh ("He Who Enlightens"), a saintly Vietnamese revolutionary with obscure antecedents but formidable organizational skills. In return for freedom, Ho merged his Viet Minh League with the Dong Minh Hoi, an uneasy marriage never really consummated but nonetheless solemnized on 28 March 1944 with the Chinese-

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sanctioned announcement of a "Provisional Republican Government of Viet-Nam," a body in which the Viet Minh were in a minority but which Ho and his Communist lieutenants were able to dominate by virtue of their better organization, discipline and ruthlessness.

11. With Chinese backing -- and, subsequently, some OSS support -- Ho set about organizing guerrilla bands, intelligence gathering and escape and evasion nets (for downed allied pilots) in Vietnam. The military aspects of this task he entrusted to an ex-schoolteacher, and charter member of the Vietnamese Communist Party, named Vo Nguyen Giap. Much mythology has been generated about how Ho's Viet Minh bands valiantly fought the Japanese. In point of fact, though the Viet Minh did collect intelligence and did help allied pilots escape, the only documented instance of Viet Minh-initiated military action against the Japanese is an attack on a 40-man Japanese garrison in the resort town of Tam Dao during the summer of 1945. Viet Minh bands did occasionally harass French forces, but the bulk of such military activity as Viet Minh forces did engage in was targetted against armed bands of VNQDD, who were also fighting the Japanese (and the French) but whom Ho wanted eliminated as potential political threats. Ho was primarily interested in husbanding and developing his military assets for future use in the Vietnamese political arena. He saw no point or profit in squandering them against the Japanese, whose ultimate defeat was already evident and who therefore posed no long-term threat to Ho's ambitions. Ho did just enough to keep the allies, particularly the Americans, happy and keep their supply pipeline flowing.

12. Japan's precipitate surrender produced a fluid situation of chaos, which Ho -- with a combination of skill and chutzpah -- turned to his advantage by proclaiming power and authority he did not have and announcing (on 2 September 1945) the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with himself as President (the new DRV being the outgrowth of the "Provisional Government" set up in Chinese exile the previous year).

13. Mr. Harrison's article tells part of what happened next, but omits several salient and illuminating details. A National Assembly was indeed set up in the manner Mr. Harrison indicates, but it was actually very short lived. The Assembly convened on 2 March 1946, voted the investiture of Ho's government and ratified the establishment of several committees including a National Resistance Committee (of which Giap was named President) and a Communist-dominated Permanent Committee to function when the Assembly was not in session. This business completed, the Assembly was adjourned and those delegates who were not members of the government or key committees were sent back to their provincial constituencies "where important business awaited them."

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14. As Mr. Harrison indicates, Ho played his hand carefully and skillfully. The overt composition of his government was structured in a manner to lull non-Communist suspicion and soothe non-Communist sensibilities. The Interior Ministry, as Mr. Harrison notes, was nominally directed by a respected non-Communist nationalist named Huynh Thuc Khang. Khang was a venerable scholar, but he was also 70 years old and quite incapable of controlling his Communist subordinates who actually ran the Ministry.

15. On 31 May 1946, Ho went to France to negotiate with the French. Anticipating a long absence (Ho did not return until 20 September), he appointed an Acting President. To prove what a high-principled nationalist he was, Ho designated Khang to serve as the acting head of the DRV. With these new duties, Khang naturally could not continue to handle the Interior Ministry, so Ho designated Vo Nguyen Giap to take on those duties during Khang's tenure as President. Once Ho had departed (and, hence, detached himself personally from what was happening in Hanoi), Giap went ruthlessly to work to smash what was left of organized non-Communist opposition to the now completely Communist-controlled Viet Minh. Giap's particular targets were the surviving organized remnants of the VNQDD, whom he harried into the ground with considerable assistance from the French. No one outside the Vietnamese Communist hierarchy is likely to know just how many non-Communist nationalists were physically liquidated in Giap's savage purge, but 5,000 is a very conservative estimate.

16. After Ho returned to Vietnam in the fall of 1946, and clucked sadly at Giap's "unfortunate excesses" (which had eliminated most of Ho's potential opponents), the Assembly was convened one final time (on 31 October) to approve the Government's structure and conduct. The night before it met, Giap arrested all surviving members who might have been tactless enough to ask awkward questions or keep the proceedings from being unanimous. Ho defended his record before the Assembly and resigned. The Assembly promptly asked him to form a new government. He presented his new list of ministers on 3 November for approval which was immediately granted. All portfolios formerly (if nominally) held by non-Communist nationalists were now given to Viet Minh (and Party) activists. The Communist take-over was virtually complete, but there was one final scene to play.

17. In late November and early December 1946, the storm clouds gathered. Ho pulled his Viet Minh regulars out of Hanoi to protect them, leaving behind his militia units, many of whom were ex-VNQDD, fanatically anti-French but restive at Communist control over the anti-French movement. On the morning of 19 December, Ho sent Sainteny, the French High Commissioner, a friendly letter deploring the existing state of tension and urging mutual steps to calm the situation. Giap, the DRV Minister of Defense, recommended that

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the French cancel an order confining the French troops to their barracks so that the atmosphere could be improved to facilitate the negotiation of Franco-DRV differences. That night the Viet Minh attacked and the Franco-Viet Minh war began. The furious battle for Hanoi that ensued covered the escape of Ho and his senior colleagues. The Viet Minh militia fought bravely and well and were virtually wiped out. That, of course, was fine with Ho since the French thus liquidated those whom Ho might have had trouble with later. Ho now had complete control over the anti-French struggle, he was about to execute the first stage in Lenin's two-stage theory of revolution. His days of manipulating coalitions were temporarily over.

18. As non-Communist Vietnamese well know, no Vietnamese nationalist leaders or parties have had long enough spoons to sup with Ho and survive -- either politically or, in many cases, physically. Ho has had more than 40 years of experience in operating in coalition or cooperation with non-Communist nationalists. The record he and his senior lieutenants have written over these four decades has been consistent and, to non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists, chilling. In the non-Communist circles in South Vietnam, therefore, there is understandable edginess over the prospect of possibly embarking once again down a well-trod road over which many have journeyed but from which few have returned.

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